

## Let's Make a Difference Annual Youth Conference 2008, June 1st to June 8<sup>th</sup>

"The idea of quiet time has inspired me to design the best airport in the world!" expressed a young lady at the Youth Conference 2008.

The Annual Youth Conference – Let's Make A Difference 2008, brought together 206 participants, transcending all barriers of religion, status & caste from 30 cities across the nation, at Asia Plateau, a training centre for Initiatives of Change.

The conference began on the eve of June 1, 2008, as the youth team welcomed participants into the auditorium. The crowd was full of enthusiasm. A portrait of Dalai Lama unveiled at the inauguration, was presented to Asia Plateau. It was painted by a Sikh who passed away only a few days after it was completed. The inauguration set the mood, preparing the participants for their journey with Initiatives of Change.

The initial interaction between the participants was amidst the serene environs of Asia Plateau. In such an ambience, the first quiet time allowed them a never before experience of getting introduced to their inner selves. The tranquility of the place encouraged emotions that were penned through poetry and magical words.

In the first session, the philosophy of Initiatives of Change was introduced. The concept of the four absolutes – Purity, Honesty, Unselfishness and Love, was put forth before the participants. While discussing 'purity', a young fellow questioned what was wrong with viewing pornographic material for personal pleasure? When asked if he felt comfortable watching adult scenes with his family, he self-consciously said no. There was his answer. We cannot watch it with family, because it's vulgar, and addiction leads to vulgarity of the mind. Greed has no end. In times ahead one would need psychological help. Instead of abusing the hunger for sex this way, it needed to be dissolved to nurture purity for future love, in the tryst to stay on the right side of the fine line between lust and love.

The charm of this session was that it encouraged learning through the sharing of personal experiences. The concept of absolutes was agreed on, but the question that teased the audience was – 'In today's world, how does one put these absolutes into practice?'

Coordinators shared their experiences. One such sharing was about the power of honesty that embarrassed a traffic officer who had demanded a bribe. It made him so apologetic that he pardoned the fine, which by law he is allowed to do.

One of the youngsters added, 'I want to work for this idea at AP for next hundred days. I am leaving my bad habit behind, I hope I can sustain it.'

The consensus arrived at was - Everything begins with a realization and a strong will to follow the right path, however the journey of practicing absolutes is always a learning process.

The conference was so designed that it allowed a sufficient quality of quiet time to the participants for introspection. Inputs were important aspects of quiet time. During one of the quiet time inputs, ego, relationships, impurity and the hollowness of individuals were explained through an interesting exercise. They were metaphorized through a glass pitcher which contained colorful flowers, but muddy water, stones, cigarettes, torn cloth and dry twigs at the bottom. A comparison was made between the individual who masked the goodness but was impure inside, and the glass jar. This exercise was received with more meaning with the sharing of personal experiences. This helped the audience connect easily to the philosophy of the absolutes. The quiet time thus gave them a key to introspect on these principles in life. Individuals shared their reflections and introspections, while some were left amazed by the personal touch given to the sharing by the organizers.

A typical day at the youth conference began with a Morning Prayer and exercise, quiet time and sharing, followed by the sessions. Documentary films were showcased, to increase people's awareness of global warming and sustainable living. The evenings were designed with 'Time of Silence' where the participants could relax by listening to soothing music before they proceeded for dinner.

Dr. P. D. Shenoy, a bureaucrat, conducted a session on Consumer Grievances and Conflict Resolution. He enthralled the audiences with his interactive oratory, channelizing their thoughts to the powers of the consumers. He authoritatively maintained that be it a mobile phone or an expensive car or even a notebook, the consumer has the right and power to take the authority to task in case of deceit. The second part of his session about Conflict Resolution, received the active participation of the audiences who themselves became a part of the conflict resolution process.

The next empowering session for the youth, Right to Information Act, was conducted by former Cabinet Secretary, Mr. Prabhat Kumar. He explained to the participants about the power and effectiveness of the RTI tool. He emphasized on how an individual can use the RTI to make available any kind of information about issues of his concern, how the system can be questioned to ensure smooth and transparent governance. RTI can be credited as the best bill passed in independent India. Mr. Prabhat Kumar personally guided zealous participants in drafting RTI applications. The session concluded with each participant feeling content and empowered with the tool of RTI.

Mr. Vipin T. was invited from Ashoka - Innovators for the Public, a citizen sector organization, that funds social entrepreneur projects. He spoke about social entrepreneurship, inviting and encouraging the youth to take up causes, they feel for. A visual on 'Child Abuse' impacted the audiences, while a success story by a participant added a practical approach.

Mr. Prashant Golwalkar, a world tour cyclist narrated to the audiences his experiences of a 'Cycle World Tour'. He expressed how he nourished his dream of touring the world on a cycle, followed his inner thoughts and finally accomplished it.

Group Discussions played an important role in encouraging personal sharing and bond building. Sharing of experiences by group coordinators added to the charm. Wash-ups, services helped built up team work and sense of dignity of labour.

An evening postcard writing session brought back memories of their loved ones to participants, and the number of postcards written said it all. These emotions were captured by the poignant melodies of the sarod played by Mr. Drupad Mistry the same evening.

Family remains the most important aspect of our lives. Making a good family is every

individual's quest. But often we feel separated from our loved ones as we place ourselves above the rest, and carry the burden of broken relationships.

After the 'Ego' had dissolved through quiet times, participants took initiative to call up their families and apologize for their misdeeds.

A young girl from Nashik, shared how she ran away from her home because of the perpetual tension between her parents due to her alcoholic father. She expressed how much she missed her father and shared about his love towards her.

"I miss my mother; my step mother treated me badly. To my bad fortune, I was sold in Mumbai to a stranger for a few thousands rupees. Now I stay in a Home away from my own, I miss a family. I have felt peace here and met good people" expressed another girl.

A Tibetan friend shared his regret about not being able to save his ailing father who had not disclosed his illness till the terminal stages.

The love between two brothers from Mumbai came through in their flow of emotion – they could not wait to hug each other. Immense joy was experienced by the sisters, the elder waiting to hear the younger call her didi and as the promise was made, tears of joy rolled down their face. When their parents were told about the episode over a call, they could not believe what had happened to their daughters. It was a moment of bliss for everyone.

A Delhi boy shared he was adopted. "I love my parents and will always stay with them even if I come to know who my real parents are. My parents mean more to me than my biological parents, I love them truly."

The air was filled with emotion and one could realize the value and importance of family. The sharing made the participants feel light-hearted. Self-realization had pacified all the participants. This promised the beginning of a change.

The conference had begun to conclude. It was time for everyone to go back to their lives, and take charge of it. Memories of fun, unburdened hearts, love and care, friendships and more than anything, the learning of 'Back to the Basics' had to be taken along. The young participants left behind tremendous energy and they departed with exuberance and determination to make a difference in their lives and in society.